

The Role of Library Associations: A Symposium

The Association's Viewpoint*

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FROM where, from what, from whom does the library association's viewpoint on its role come? Is the role of the association viewed and determined by the membership as a whole, by the governing body, or by the charter and/or the constitution of the association?

It is true, I believe, that the role of the association is developed, affected, and changed—from one period to another and depending upon a variety of circumstances—by all three of these: the membership, the governing body, and the charter. However, I should like to suggest that the initial and determining viewpoint of a library association's role is to be found in its charter.

CHARTER RESPONSIBILITIES AND OBJECTIVES

I suggest the charter as a basic point of departure because the charter, approved and granted as it is by the state in which the association has a legal home, must provide the reason or reasons for the existence of the association. The state in granting the charter approves these reasons. The language of the charter gives the hopes, aspirations, intentions, and, most important, the objectives of the association.

What the charter states in terms of intentions and objectives is most important, for these help determine in the eyes of the law what the association may do. What the charter does not state in terms of specific objectives is equally important, for therein may be discovered later those activities the association cannot enter into unless the state is able and willing, upon application, to amend the charter.

The charter of an association is usually also the basis for its nonprofit, tax-exempt status. This status may be at one or another level depending upon the nature of the objectives and the resulting classification made by the U. S. government. It is surprising at first glance how these classifica-

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tions vary. To use one example only: If the tax-exemption status is at the highest level, then the association is recognized as an educational organization. While this status permits the association to do a number of things and receive a variety of benefits, it may also deny the association the right to carry on certain activities, chiefly those that may result in direct economic benefits to the members and which are not educational in nature, as, for example, the conducting of a placement service.

The broad objectives of a library association are the furthering of library service, the profession of librarianship, and the social and cultural welfare of the country. The last named is in the long run the most important; the first two, in fact, are important only to the extent that they contribute to it.

The emphasis that must be placed on the different objectives will vary from time to time according to the status of the country's educational and cultural development, the state of the country's library service, and the abilities and competencies which the association is able to command. A constant question, then, affecting the association's viewpoint of its role is: what can it do—what must it do—under an existing set of circumstances to carry forward its objectives?

In determining its role, the library association needs to deal with the visionary as well as that which is more practical and immediate. It must constantly peer into the future in certain recognition that what works well today will almost certainly need to be changed tomorrow. Today has one set of circumstances determined by population, educational levels, social conditions, and technology. Tomorrow these will be different. Today the people have needs that can be well, if not completely, served by existing forms and philosophies of library service. Tomorrow these needs, too, will be different. Consequently, an important role of the library association is to encourage acts of pioneering—of seeing and planning and projecting beyond what meets present and immediate needs of society into what society will require tomorrow.

Even the briefest of glances at the history of library associations in this country will reveal this pioneering quality—a restlessness with things as they are—which is such an essential to progress. We can find pioneering that has led from locked cases to open shelves, from 3 in. by 5 in. cards to the electronic tape, from the printed card service to cataloging-in-source, from the reserved book room to the undergraduate library, from a curator point of view to adult education through libraries, from training classes to degrees, from geographic insularity to regional systems, from a too sacred concept of the book as a physical item to the use of paperbacks.

The right to form an association is well established, and the good re-

sults of association endeavors are well recognized in both social and political areas. It is as true now as when de Tocqueville wrote about our American aptitude for "Associations" that "the most natural privilege of man, next to the right of acting for himself, is that of combining his exertions with those of his fellow creatures and of acting in common with them." The right to do something, in this instance to form an association, carries with it, however, the twin obligations of responsibility and leadership. It is essential, therefore, that an association assume the role of leadership.

The areas in which a library association must display leadership are as numerous as they are easy to enumerate. These are basically those areas which are essential to the development of librarianship and the expansion of library service. These two goals are inseparable, but curiously different. The former means the development of background, philosophy, and skills which establish and strengthen a profession in its service to society. The latter, while based of course on the former, is the eventual discharge of the responsibility owed to society. I should like to discuss briefly seven more or less basic areas in which it is necessary for a library association to exercise leadership in carrying out its charter objectives. These are in no order of suggested priority.

A *first* area is that of education for librarianship. This involves the establishment of and adherence to a level of formal preparation that will lead to possession by the student of the principles of librarianship and a broad educational background rendering him capable of mature judgment and analysis. The standards of library education must be constantly safeguarded and reviewed.

A *second* area is the development of standards for the types of library service in the fields of interest and responsibility of the association as guides to the profession and to the community served by the library.

Third must be included the recruitment of able persons to the profession, persons who come into the profession from a sense of purpose rather than as the result of drift, persons whose sense of purpose and dedication cause them to share the spirit of the words written over three hundred years ago by Francis Bacon: "I hold every man a debtor to his profession; from which as men of course do seek to receive countenance and profit, so ought they of duty to endeavor themselves by way of amends to be a help and ornament thereunto."

Recruitment, it must be remembered, or I would at any rate argue, cannot be done by pronouncements and posters, by books and brochures issued by an association; recruiting can best be done individually through person-to-person efforts. The association, however, has an obligation to provide the places and the facts that the individual librarian can put to effective use.

As a *fourth* area, we must include the legislative process, in which an association, in accordance with its responsibilities to society as given in its charter, has an obligation to engage. It must do this, I submit, for two reasons: (1) to exert as best it can a beneficial effect upon legislation that has a bearing on library service, and (2) to assist legislators, who have a right to expect expressions of opinion and judgment from leadership bodies.

The role of the association in legislation, particularly at the national level, is not necessarily limited to legislative matters involving library service, although restraint must be exercised in going beyond these. The library association is obligated to make its views known on legislation affecting education as a whole, but it should do so with a particular emphasis on the integral part that library service can and must play in the whole educational process.

As a *fifth* point, the library association must exercise a positive role in the creation of a body of literature in its areas of interest. The development of this body of literature is, as Flexner pointed out, necessary to the establishment of a profession. The job here is to cause to be written, published, and made available basic literature on all aspects or particular aspects of library service and librarianship, depending upon the scope of the association's accepted responsibilities.

Sixth, the library association cannot and should not, anymore than other types of associations, remain aloof from the international scene; it must develop relationships with similar foreign bodies. The purpose is one of mutual advantage through the exchange of information and experience. The national interest also figures heavily here, for the library association through its international relations can contribute much to better international understanding. The area of international relations is a delicate one, as all efforts at all levels show, and needs to be pursued with good will, the desire to learn as well as to aid, and a high sense of sophistication.

Finally, in my brief catalog of leadership areas, mention must be made of the informational and educational role that the association is obligated to perform. There are two sides to this role. There is the association's obligation to its profession, which must be kept informed of association programs and activities. This is relatively easy or at least as easy as any effort at communication can be, since the audience is presumed to be an interested one, although this presumption is far from wholly valid and there is much concerning an association's program activities and goals that requires repetitive presentation.

The other side of the informational and educational role concerns the association's obligation to report to the general public and to specific publics. It is necessary and desirable that the various publics for which

library service exists be told constantly of developments and opportunities and needs. The library story is not easy to tell to a people whose ears and eyes are constantly assailed—and I can think of no better word than “assailed”—by all the mass media carrying today’s dramatic stories. While the mass media can be effectively used, it is wise for the association to give its greatest attention to long-range informational efforts through journals which reach opinion molders and through cooperative efforts with lay groups and groups representing related disciplines.

Whatever the means, the intention must always be to help bring about a clear understanding of the needs, values, and potentialities of library service.

One could easily extend this catalog of the many fronts upon which the library association carries forward its objectives through the exercise of leadership. These that I have enumerated, while of high importance, are illustrative only.

This exercise of leadership, while contributing to the advancement of objectives, serves also to cast the association in the role of national spokesman for the profession it represents. It is essential that there be such a spokesman. Without such a recognized voice, speaking for many individuals, it would be difficult—indeed, it would be impossible—for professional tenets and practices to receive recognition and acceptance.

The many leadership efforts that need to be made, the variety of fronts, the varying choices of ways and means, the changing times—all combine to require that the association periodically review the state of library service and define the goals towards which it must direct its efforts.

ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND OBJECTIVES

Having looked briefly into the role of the library association as affected by its charter and into the leadership efforts it must make to pursue its objectives, I should now like to turn to an examination of viewpoints which it is desirable an association hold toward its organizational structure.

There is always a certain amount of membership criticism over the amount of soul-searching thought that healthy organizations of all kinds give to organization. This criticism is as inevitable as it is unwarranted. Proper organization is essential to the effective and democratic functioning of the group process, and it is through this group process that an association determines its course of action, implements its decisions, and maintains a constant check on its operations.

The chief goals of association organization are not difficult to list, although achievement of these goals is a different matter and requires constant attention. The organization must be of a nature that encourages

and permits membership participation. It would be well if such could be required, but, considering human nature, this is not feasible. The organization must provide a forum for a free expression of opinion, for a constant exercise of criticism, and for the formulation of policies. The organization must allow for a system of checks and balances to the end that governing boards are kept in a position of responsibility and accountability. The organization must provide means for constant communication to and among the members.

The provision of a proper and functioning organization is no part-time task for members and officers. Organization for the sake of organization is useless, but careful attention to organization as a means by which objectives can be carried out and principles realized is one of the essential roles of an association.

CONCLUSION

A library association is not an artificial entity existing only in the eyes of the law, as Marshall said of corporations. Within this country library associations are, for the most part, made up of individuals—thinking, feeling, concerned individuals. The association in considering its role must keep always in mind the reasons which impelled the members to join together, the leadership areas which society has obligated it to assume, and the means by which its members can work together harmoniously and effectively and with the most scrupulous attention to the democratic process.